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Recommended Citation

Carrillo-Rush, Vanita, "Suffocating Under a Sealed Bell Jar: The Angel/Monster Dichotomy in the Literary Tradition" (2012).
Humanities Capstone Projects. Paper 10.

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Document Type

Capstone Project

Degree Name

Bachelor of Arts

Department

English

First Advisor

Pauline Beard

Subject Categories

Arts and Humanities

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Suffocating Under a Sealed Bell Jar: The Angel/Monster Dichotomy in the Literary Tradition

Literature is a reflection and reflector of society, a cyclical entity perpetuating ideas. Ideas are written into literature as justification for ideas already in existence, and later taken from literature as further justification for upholding the status quo; literary ideas are heavily ingrained in both literature, and in society. One literary idea in particular is deeply rooted in tradition, stemming back to the beginning of literature—the dichotomized roles of women.

The portrayal of women in literature began with the Greeks, in both written and inscribed texts. The story of Pandora opened more than a box of horrors; Pandora began what was to be the entrapment of the female character in literature, the entrapment in one of two roles: the angel or the monster. Women are already considered inferior in Greek society, but by writing down this supposed inferiority, the Greeks engraved the female character in stone. Later, as the Greek Pantheon condenses down into the Jewish, and later Christian, faith, the angel and monster dichotomy continues, entering into The Garden of Eden with Lilith and Eve.

Further still, into modern literature, the struggle between the two ends of the spectrum persists. The dichotomy is strong, and even as women take up the pen, breaking free from tradition appears to be impossible. Examining Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* depicts the continued existence of the angel and monster dichotomy, exemplifying the struggle between the two sides, and the desire to break free, in Plath's heroine, Esther Greenwood. Ultimately this dichotomy is not only stunting to female characters, dictating certain roles and restricting the ability to fully develop, but detrimental to female authors; the female creators are themselves trapped in this

dichotomy in literature, unable to break from the patriarchal text of society. The dichotomy suppresses the striving female under a bell jar, suffocating her desire for autonomy under an impenetrable glass; she must choose one of two sides, or suffer societal consequences. Women will always fit one of the two roles, angel or monster, whether fulfilling that role is in life, or in death.

Chapter One: Pandora: The Original Binary

Ancient Greece is typically accepted as the beginning of civilized society. Ethics, democracy, philosophy, all aspects of what society now refers to as “civilization,” the Greeks built the foundation. Similarly, this is a time when stories, ideas, and practices began to be “set in stone,” or written down for future generations. Stories traditionally passed down by word of mouth, are now being written, or etched, or sculpted, by authors, philosophers, and artists. Physically recording societal stories and ideals led to a substantiation of the myths stronger than those of oral renditions. With the power to record comes the power to create, as well as to tell.

To record physically is to give merit, which is why, at this pivotal time in the civilizing of society, ideas started to become heavily ingrained. One idea that took hold and has yet to be dispelled entirely, is the belief of the subordination of women. The dominance of males in society began in tribal times, far before the Greeks. While pregnant or mothering, females in tribal times were incapable of traveling to neighboring tribes to learn and to build alliances, resulting in the default position of care-taker and home-maker. The males, however, traveled and learned and met with other males, thus establishing a norm of roles held by each sex.

The norms which originated logically, simply that pregnant females and children do not

travel well, perpetuated to the norm that females are inferior to males. With civilization came collaborative child-care, modes of travel other than bare feet over treacherous mountains, and still an entire half of the human race considered unequal. Greek men held the writing tools, and the sculpting chisels; they could etch and philosophize the ideals and norms of society. The women were left voiceless in a time when having a voice meant helping to shape what was to become the structure of civilization. Instead, *men* depicted the place of women in society. Men solidified what women were, what roles they held, and how the entire sex was to be perceived. The Greek creation myth indicates the general perception of women in Greece in the story of Pandora, Earth's first human woman. The story of Pandora, however, exists in two forms. The reasoning for her creation, the symbol of her box of terrors, and her role as the "second sex" diverge, pushing Pandora, and womankind, into the extremes. In one story, Pandora is portrayed as an "earth-goddess," shown on Greek vases created prior to the creation of the Parthenon, to be "rising from the earth, only half there" (Hurwit 177). In his article "Beautiful Evil: Pandora and the Athena Parthenos," Jeffrey M. Hurwit speculates that "the Athenians, in fact, conflated two Pandoras: a primeval earth-goddess, on the one hand, and the first woman, the product-artifice of the Olympian gods, on the other" (177). Pandora was generally accepted, or at least known, in two radically different forms.

Pandora's second form is the typically known form of today. Hesiod's written tale of Pandora, depicted in *Works and Days*, tells of the race of women being created as punishment for men. Men, having stolen fire from the gods with the help of Prometheus, had to be punished. The story tells of a world where no men have to work, nor do they have worries or miseries. By stealing fire, mankind angers Zeus, the highest of the Olympian gods. His anger is enough to push him to give men perpetual worries and miseries, or as Hesiod proclaims, women. The gods

create Pandora out of earth and water, and each gives her a “gift” for her box. Pandora is given to Epimetheus, the brother of Prometheus, and when Pandora opens her box of gifts, each “a sorrow to men who eat bread,” she “scattered all these and her thought caused sorrow and mischief to men” (ll 57-105). Womankind is painted as the source of all evil and misery in the world.

While the box of Hesiod’s Pandora holds evils and miseries to be inflicted upon mankind, the primeval Pandora’s box represents fertility. The earth-goddess archetype is one of care-taking and cornucopia, essentially a female that nurtures and promotes mankind. The prominent Pandora, the written version, expressed of women a need to be restrained; “the stability of the state depended upon keeping them under strict control” (Hurwit 178). The control over women came in the form of marriage, which was the metaphorical translation of the lid on Pandora’s box into Greek society; Pandora’s Box needed a lid to be controlled, and women in Greece needed marriage. Similarly, Zeus also tacked on another punishment. Now that men would have to work and be miserable for all of eternity, toward the end of their lives the miserable diseases and breaking down of their bodies would require them to have a care-taker, thus chaining them to the horrid woman further. Marriage, a social construct, is substantiated by this myth, giving reason to the restraint of women within a marriage, and the expectation of woman as caretaker. After all, it is her fault that men are so miserable to begin with.

Hurwit mentions the primeval earth-goddess Pandora briefly, but looks more closely at another woman-based binary within Greek culture, Athens’s patron goddess, the female god Athena. The patriarchy had to find a way to reckon with this placement of worship and power. The Greeks accomplished this reckoning by utilizing sculpture, a recording method still viable during this period. The myth of Pandora is inscribed at the base of a statue of Athena in Athens, visually depicting Pandora as subordinate to Athena (Athena Parthenos). This hierarchy makes

sense, as Athena is a god, and Pandora is a mortal. The distinction between the two, aside from the immortality of Athena, however, is what creates the binary. In the Greek creation myths, Athena is not born of woman, but rather from the head of her father, Zeus, who has swallowed her mother. Neither has Athena conceived children. Athena's children are spread like seed, and not born through childbirth; Athena's children were "born of extraordinary circumstances, as the result of Hephaistos's premature ejaculation and the spontaneous generation of the child from the sperm that the virgin Athena wiped off and threw upon the earth" (Hurwitt 181). Athena, thus, is still a virgin, still pure. Also, Athena, a theoretically powerful woman, has been stripped of gender by the patriarchy, and given an androgynous state of being. Athena's androgyny and her placement above Pandora "reduces, even renounces, the natural role of women, and so elevates the masculine" (Hurwit 181). The Greeks demean women from every angle; Pandora is womankind, and must therefore be contained as she possesses all evil. Athena, the patron god of Athens, is not really a woman, but if she were, she would still certainly be a virgin. Womankind is a binary on all accounts.

In "Refractions of the Feminine: The Monstrous Transformations of Lulu," Karin Littau more closely examines the effect of creation myths, Greek and otherwise, on the portrayal of women in literary history. Littau's focus is on the character of Lulu in plays by Frank Wedekind (1894), but her overall idea applies to all women characters in literary tradition. Pandora, Littau argues, expresses the beginning of the dichotomy of women in the literary tradition.

Man creates the image of Pandora, or the history of her; "it is her *his*-story, and also her historylessness" (Littau 891). Pandora's binary within herself, represented by her earth-goddess version and her bringer-of-all-evils version, "depict[s] her in the classic dichotomy of the good and evil woman" (Littau 891). Man has projected onto Pandora traits of seduction, evil, and

death, as well as traits of beauty, goodness, and purity. She exists as a vehicle through which men can perpetuate the dominance of males. In either of the extremes, women stay subject to the will of men. If a woman is pure and caring, she should want to be a good wife and mother. And if a woman is an evil seductress, then she should be controlled and contained by mankind; if womankind continues to exist in these extremes, then she is always subject to the control of men, as she is contained in a male-created role.

For centuries after the Greeks the subjugation of women continued untouched. The disparity between sexes owes much to creation myths and the original, inscribed, characterization of womankind. “To be ascribed whatever images or representations one might choose to project onto her, is to have perpetuated the historylessness of woman” (Littau 899). Thousands of years have passed, yet the roles endure. Womankind, in modern culture, is now allowed to hold a pen, is beginning a history. Traditionally, however, women have been given traits by men, traits in the form of binaries. Mankind has had centuries to build and fortify the patriarchy, womankind has had scarcely a century to begin to tear it down, let alone begin the building of an equalized structure. The question exists whether or not women can even exist as autonomous within a structure also allowing for male autonomy. Women typically have to take on the language, or the traditional norms and characterizations, made by men to even succeed within the literary tradition. Much like Athena, even the most powerful of women are still only attributed to having been born of man’s mind.

Chapter Two: Lilith and Eve: The Binary Enters the Garden

Moving forward in literary history from the Greeks and Pandora, analyzing the Hebrew texts of the creation of humanity again depicts women in a particularly dichotomized manner. The characters of Eve and Lilith are written into being, and like Pandora, translated from the text and into the societal vision of women. The echoes of Pandora in Lilith and Eve are in themselves striking, and the echoes serve in strengthening the already split portrayal of women in literature and society. Eve and Lilith build on the foundation of the Pandora-binary, bringing that binary into The Bible, a text and a dichotomy which still survive today.

Although left out of The Bible, the story of Lilith exists in Hebrew mythology, portraying her as “both the first woman *and* the first monster” (Gilbert and Gubar 35). Lilith is the first woman, made from dust like Adam. Being made from the same material, at the same time, and under the same circumstances, suggests a level of equality between the two. The story, however, is also written by men living in a society which views women as lesser than men, so the story automatically reflects these ideals. Reflecting ideals in literature is circular; ideals are reflected during the writing process because this is what the author knows to be “true,” and these same ideals are again reflected back onto society as “true” because they are substantiated by text. A society considering men as superior to women would never record in a creation text a woman as equal to a man, as this would seriously upset the societal structure; clearly discrepancy between sexes already existed in society, leaving Lilith no chance at equality.

The Hebrew myth of Lilith differs among periods, as the scholar Raphael Patai depicts in his piece “Lilith”, but the overall idea of her in every period is the same: “The very fact that as

late as the eighteenth or even the nineteenth century the belief in [Lilith] not only survived but remained a potent factor in religious consciousness and conduct, is in itself surprising" (312). Lilith believes herself to be equal to Adam, and the two are unable to come to an understanding of what the relationship should be, as Adam believed himself to be above her. The issue of superiority is depicted in Adam and Lilith's sexual relationship; "Because she considered herself his equal, she objected to lying beneath him, so that when he tried to force her submission, she became enraged" (Gilbert and Gubar 35). This is the point in the story when Lilith becomes the female monster. She speaks the Ineffable Name (God) and flees from Adam and the Garden to the Red Sea, "a place of ill repute, full of lascivious demons" (Patai 296). Lilith does not give in to Adam's will, and the story that follows her escape illustrates the dangers of a woman who presumes her equality, as Gilbert and Gubar explain, "What [Lilith's] history suggests is that in patriarchal culture, female speech and female 'presumption'-- that is, angry revolt against male dominion-- are inextricably linked and inevitablyemonic" (35).

Lilith's story after Eden paints her as the "anti-woman," a woman consumed with unfeminine traits of destruction and rage. In her anger and bitterness, Lilith passively runs from Eden and hides herself away. She becomes promiscuous, another undesirable trait in womankind, and spawns many demon offspring via her promiscuity. God, having attempted to reason with Lilith to move back to Eden, realizes that she is resolved in her abandonment of Adam, and that she will continue to bring these demonic children into the world. He sends three angels to stop the female monster, and the result is her consent to the killing of one hundred of her offspring per day, the destruction of her creations. In her obstinacy, however, Lilith does lay claim to a power to kill human children as well, warning the angels that male babies will be especially susceptible to her wrath. Articulating Lilith as a danger to human children is the point

in which the story becomes less of a story, and more of an infiltration of the society outside of the text. Lilith is now a viable threat to the man-made world, a monster for men and mothers (Patai 296-298).

Destroying babies is the antithesis of the societal conception of being a woman. Mother Earth, or a warm and caring creator, is a common archetype. Lilith directly opposes this womanly archetype, a truly monstrous vision in her anti-womanhood. Not only is she proclaimed as being a destroyer, she is anti-woman in another respect; she “constituted a special danger for women during many periods of their sexual cycle, such as before defloration and during menstruation” (Patai 298). Women are also more susceptible during childbirth. Menstruating and childbirth bring womankind together. Menstruation is a shared experience encapsulating the feminine, and an occurrence strictly female. As a female, Lilith and womankind should come together in this sense. However, by fashioning Lilith as a threat to female commonalities, like motherhood, the authors of the monstrous Lilith, —men—, use Lilith as a way to threaten women away from standing up to men, because to attempt equality or autonomy would lead women to *monstrosity*. Identifying Lilith as a threat to the creation of children and to the feminine cycle of renewal serves in deterring women from seeking what Lilith sought. The very characteristics which Lilith rejects are the characteristics which women often identify with; seeking equality would not only result in failure, it would also result in becoming an unfeminine monster.

Lilith exists not only as a danger to women, but also as a danger to men. Her disobedience to Adam in the Garden is just the beginning of her threats toward men. Male children are particularly targeted by Lilith, and should be carefully protected up until the time of circumcision. Adult males fall victim to Lilith in other ways, more in danger of seduction than

death. After the Fall, Lilith again becomes attracted to Adam; she “used to come to him against his will, and conceive from Adam (and she bore these beings). And they are always sad and full of sorrow and sighs and there is no joy at all among them” (Patai 302). Adam, although supposedly the more powerful of the two, is still accounted for as victim in this scenario. This is a warning to men to be wary of the seductress, another facet of the monster woman. Not only is Lilith rendered as taking advantage of Adam, she is also written as taking advantage of all men. Lilith is the reason behind “spontaneous nocturnal emission” in men, coming to them in their sleep in “the shape of a woman or a virgin” and then after succeeding in seducing the man “she turns from a beautiful seductress into a cruel fury, and kills her victim” (Patai 302). Lilith begins as an angelic form, a beautiful virgin woman, and then converts into the furious monster-woman, a killer of men. This portrayal reflects that men should be wary of angelic women as well as the seductress/monster type female, because even the most angelic woman has a monster inside of her.

Monster as being an inherent part of a woman is expressed in Eve, the second woman in the Garden with Adam. She was created of Adam’s rib, eliminating the idea that she could be his equal. Anne Lepidus Lerner explores the character of Eve in her essay “Back to the Beginning”, observing that “Eve was the second ‘first’ woman, a remake described in Genesis 2, who accepted a subservient position” (9). Eve is a remake, a new model, created as an answer to Lilith and the monster. Unfortunately, men still will not allow for a completely trustworthy woman, because that leaves the patriarchy vulnerable. The angel woman, just as easily as the monster woman, is threatening to the male-dominated society, even if perhaps she was created with more care for man. Reluctance to give women any credibility leads to The Fall, and Eve’s tempting of Adam “into violating the divine command not to eat the fruit of the Tree of

Knowledge of Good and Bad" (Lerner 10). Much like Pandora and her box, Eve is portrayed as releasing all of the woes and horrors onto mankind, ending blissful innocence for all eternity.

Although unintentional in both cases, the result is the same; a woman, even an angelic subservient woman, still has the capability to destroy a perfect utopian world. Creation myths like Pandora and Lilith and Eve cultivate a general distrust of women in all forms, angel and monster, because each story depicts a woman as releasing evil into the world, and destroying this "Garden" type world that mankind inhabits.

In her book, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, Elaine Pagels closely examines the book of Genesis, a Biblical story which Pagels claims became "a primary means for revealing and defending basic attitudes and values" for many Jews and Christians (xix). Even if Genesis is perceived as only a folk tale, the values and ideas still wove into society, in marriage, sexual practices, and in the conception of women; "The story of Adam and Eve [supports] traditional marriage and [proves] that women, being naturally gullible, are unfit for any role but raising children and keeping house" (Pagels xxiii).

The image of Eve was further split in regards to an outlying Christian sect, the Gnostics. While Orthodox Eve was an angel in practice, but still inherently a monster due to her womanhood, the Eve of the Gnostics differed greatly. The Gnostics, called deviants by the Orthodox Christians, developed in the first two hundred years of Christianity, and essentially sought an independent experience with God, renouncing Church leaders and many Orthodox practices, and even beliefs. The divergence can be seen easily in their portrayal of Eve.

Eve is blamed by the Orthodox Christians and Jews as destroying the Garden, and bringing pain and a loss of innocence onto humanity until the end of time. The Gnostics, however, "often depicted Eve –or the feminine spiritual power she represented—as the source of

spiritual awakening” (Pagels 68). The Gnostics saw The Fall as a positive advancement for humankind, because knowledge made humans more like God. Eve is presented more in the Mother Earth, creator, and great-awakener angel image, rather than the destroyer/monster image of the Orthodox. The Gnostic poem “Thunder, Perfect Mind” examines Eve’s dichotomy in verse, recognizing her double and opposing image; “I am the honored one and the scorned one/I am the whore and the holy one”(MacRae ll. 12-13). Opposing the Orthodox beliefs so extremely resulted in a persecution of the Gnostics, and Eve’s less dangerous interpretation did not gain the ground that the Orthodox Eve gained in belief structures. Eve exists in the Orthodox view, an angel on the outside, but still the monster who destroyed the Garden on the inside.

Lilith and Eve are two female characters building on the angel/monster dichotomy in Literature. Lilith is the first monster, demonic to the core, even when hiding behind the shape of the beautiful virgin; Lilith becomes the anti-woman, feared by men and by women as the destroyer of creation and a happy world. Eve is the second woman, angelic in her subservience to Adam, and because of her blissful nature. Ironically, Eve the angel is the ultimate monster, bringing about The Fall and the end to the Garden. Both Lilith and Eve serve as warnings to men: beware of the angel and the monster, as both versions of woman can do harm. The real harm, however, is inflicted upon women, as this binary furthers the idea that women are less than men, owing to actual creation and to the inevitable destruction of bliss at the hand of a woman. The story of Adam, Lilith, Eve and the Garden continue the angel/monster binary in the literary tradition, solidifying an idea of women as one or the other, never a gray area, and always dangerous to mankind in the end.

Chapter Three:

Esther Greenwood's Struggle for Autonomy

In the development of the novel, female characters have been cast as either the monster or the angel, a dichotomy stemming from the patriarchy, weaving its way into society and literature alike. When women began to write novels, a dilemma arose regarding female portrayal in female-authored works; the female author now had to develop the female character, and the decision to continue the extremes of angel and monster seemingly falls to their pens. Female authors fall victim to a writer's block to end all writer's blocks. The block comes from neither a lack of material, nor a lack of talent, but rather from a social constraint so engraved in literary tradition, so perpetuated by the patriarchal rule, that to break free nears impossibility. The reality became apparent, however, that this dichotomy existed not just in literature, but in the perceptions of women of themselves outside of the text. Pursuing writing did not free up the female author to write a new story for the female characters; rather it provided yet another mirror for patriarchal literature to reflect back the social constructions locking the angel in the house, and "the madwoman in the attic."

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* offers insight into the angel/monster dichotomy, as the leading character is not only a female but also a writer; Esther Greenwood is hit twice as hard. As an author, Esther's original texts are perceived as impossible for her to create, as she is female, and thus incapable of authoring her own text. Females do not have novel ideas, or serious thoughts, that merit being written down. Instead, the female writer is expected to copy the text already in existence, or the patriarchal text of society. Women are mirrors, reflecting back an image, but never the creators of one.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, feminist scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the representation of female characters, and how in literature the representation developed into the angel/monster dichotomy. Gilbert and Gubar depict the perception of female authors by both males, and the female author herself. Nineteenth Century writer and critic John Ruskin is quoted as having claimed “the woman’s ‘power is not for rule, nor for battle, and her intellect is not for invention or creation’” (Gilbert and Gubar 24). Esther aspires to be a creator of writing, not of children. She belongs to the Honors College of her University, she earns high grades, and she is selected for a desirable summer internship at *Mademoiselle*, a magazine in New York City. At her internship, before her mental anguish begins, she attends all of the requirements of the magazine; Esther works hard to cultivate her ability to create. But the angel woman is to possess complete selflessness. To be completely selfless, or to lack a self, means to live a “life that has no story” (Gilbert and Gubar 25). The angel woman takes no actions for herself, so she can build no plot, nor develop as a character; the angel cannot be an author, because she does not possess invention, she has no story to tell.

The monster cannot be an author of her own story either, because she destroys whatever she succeeds in creating. Gilbert and Gubar best display the destruction of the monster woman in the example of Lilith, the first woman as described in Jewish texts, and aforementioned here. Lilith creates her demon offspring, but destroys them simultaneously as punishment for her creating them to begin with; Gilbert and Gubar assert that “the figure of Lilith represents the price women have been told they must pay for attempting to define themselves” (35). Lilith’s escape turns out to be no escape at all, as the flight is “a refusal and a departure, a flight of escape rather than an active rebellion” (Gilbert and Gubar 35). Lilith does not forge a new role through her rebellion, she merely becomes the angel’s counterpart: the monster.

Lacking the ability to create a story of her own, the female writer becomes merely another vehicle for the perpetuation of the patriarchal constraints on women; the female cannot be an autonomous writer, only a mirror of the patriarchal literature that she has absorbed. Esther's authorial aspirations come to a crashing halt as she perceives her limitations, these limitations becoming apparent toward the end of her schooling and internship.

As a character, Esther struggles with the dichotomy of angel or monster within herself. *The Bell Jar* is a portrayal of Esther fitting neither the angel nor the monster category, and the experience of having no other role to fill. As a writer and a character, Esther struggles for autonomy, to be assured that she is alive and not just a projection of the female expectation. Unfortunately, the dichotomy places Esther in what appears to be a predicament with no positive outcome, because by fighting the angel side, she pushes herself toward the monster end; Esther's fight to become herself continues to further this dangerous dichotomy, allowing for no escape in sight.

Esther, a young and intelligent woman, is attending a prestigious women's college and studying English, planning to be a writer of poetry. The novel's initial setting is in New York City, where Esther is interning for the summer at a well-known women's magazine, *Mademoiselle*. The magazine's assignments begin to fall flat for Esther, however, as the editorial content includes mundane topics such as fashion spreads, recipe guides, and author interviews. Esther notes early on that she "was supposed to be having the time of [her] life. [She] was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like her" (2). Only Esther was not having the time of her life. She "wasn't steering anything, not even [herself]" (2). Esther was not in control of her actions; she is merely a pawn, or an image of a young woman in New York, supposedly accomplishing notable acts in the literary world, but really just a smiling, glamorous

face to be printed in the newspaper. The internship expected nothing from Esther, only the pretense of a woman writer, and a face to reflect back the qualities of an angel.

A career as the angel looms before Esther: writing women's magazine features on the ballet or the latest fashion show. Her mother portrays another angelic path, one even more blatant in displaying the female without a story. Esther's mother is a shorthand writer, and encourages Esther to pursue the same career, as a shorthand writer will be all the rage amongst the young men. Esther was notably put off by this idea, as she "hated the idea of serving men in any way. [She] wanted to dictate [her] own thrilling letters" (62). Esther did not want to copy back the words of men, or the message of the patriarchy. She wanted to write her own words, her own story. "'What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from'" (58). Esther wants to be the arrow, not the muse or enabler for the arrow's launch.

As Esther's angelic future begins to dawn on her, she begins to throw away her literary career, tearing down what she had spent her life creating. Angeldom and the servitude of men is a future that Esther cannot bear the thought of living; the realization of her domestic fate begins to push Esther toward the opposite end of the spectrum, toward the monster. "I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should anymore. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't" (24). Esther struggles between what she should be doing (being the patriarchal angel), and doing what she shouldn't be doing (being the patriarchal monster). She finds herself unable to be either completely, jostling back and forth between the two roles. Neither fulfills her as the autonomous author of her own story, because neither angel nor monster is autonomous; to become one or the other immediately strips a woman of all "selfhood," forcing her to become an object in the patriarchal universe.

Esther's madness is inner psychological warfare on herself, stemming from the dichotomy. She is an intelligent woman trying to become a "self" in a society only allowing a patriarchal composition of the female self, nothing more than a reflection of the female written by a patriarchal pen.

Initially Sylvia Plath presents the dichotomy of angel and monster between two other young women interning with Esther: Doreen and Betsy. The angel image of one version of Pandora and of Eve is modernized with Betsy, the all-American girl from the Midwest, described as "They imported Betsy straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde ponytail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi smile" (5). Betsy is the caretaker, the pious, helpful, perky, future housewife, the angel incarnation of the time. Betsy attends all of the internship activities, and encourages Esther to do the same. She becomes a cover girl for advertisements, an exemplary woman of her time. Esther possesses neither the skills nor the inclination to be this modern ideal of a woman. She makes a point of listing off the feminine activities she cannot do: cook, write in shorthand, dance, carry a tune, balance, ride a horse. While Betsy will fill her angel role in society seamlessly, Esther would fail miserably.

Doreen is the modern monster incarnation, sexually active, and blunt. She had "blue eyes like transparent agate marbles, hard and polished and just about indestructible, and a mouth set in a sort of perpetual sneer" (4). An aspect modernized in the monster is the treatment of her in society; while the Liliths and Pandoras were ostracized, shunned, and blamed for all of Earth's problems, Doreen's type of modern monster serves a different function. Seductresses are a threat to mankind still, but a threat sought out by men for a purpose; women like Doreen do not flee to a cave, because although polite society steers away from her, certain men will actively seek her out. For example, Eric, a boy who Esther has coffee with during her early college years, boldly

states to her that “if he loved anybody, he would never go to bed with her. He’d go to a *whore* (emphasis added) if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all of that dirty business” (64). Eric intends to have both female roles in his life, each serving a mutually exclusive purpose for *mankind*.

Some level of freedom is suggested in seductive women, an idea that maybe these women are acting for themselves, rebelling against the traditional role of women. Doreen appears to be self-driven, as she skips internship events and spends time with Lenny, a man she is involved with in New York. However, as much as Doreen acts the part of being independent of societal constraints, she is in actuality only filling another patriarchal role. By rejecting the angel role, she only bounces herself to the other end of the spectrum, fulfilling the other role available to her.

At the bar, Esther watches Lenny and Doreen, noticing that Lenny “kept staring at [Doreen] the way people stare at the great white macaw in the zoo, waiting for it to say something human” (9). Doreen is not free, only further objectified, a captive in patriarchal society. Of course, there have always been sexually active women, whether prostitutes or otherwise, and there have always been men who become intimate with these women. The difference between the past seductress and Doreen resides only in the openness of her activities; some will still consider Doreen to be a whore: she will still be an example of a woman behaving badly.

Terminology used by Plath in instances of interaction between Esther and the two women further explicate the dichotomy. Esther’s feeling that Betsy was “trying to save her in some way”(5), suggests a saintly, or angelic, agenda on the part of Betsy. Similarly, with Doreen, Esther “felt wise and cynical as all hell” (6), directly opposing Betsy’s “saving.” The Heaven and

Hell imagery continues during Esther's pseudo-baptism, a hot bath which she takes after spending the evening observing Doreen act out her role as seductress. She is hoping that "All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure" (17). After spending an evening as a monster, or at least with a monster, Esther washes herself of the role, sending herself back toward purity, back toward the angel.

After the night out, ending with Doreen getting helplessly drunk and sprawling in front of Esther's doorstep, Esther decides that she "would have nothing to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends" (19). Esther purifies herself in her bath, and in essence allows Betsy to save her. Yet at the same time, everything that Doreen said "was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones" (6). Notice how Esther did not lock the door on Doreen that night—" [She] didn't lock it. [She] couldn't quite bring herself to do that" (19), —that she did not completely shut the monster out.

The men in Esther's life further expand on feminine expectations and split female roles in society. Buddy, a man whom Esther is expected to marry, has contracted Tuberculosis and is hospitalized so as not to set off the "TB bomb." Buddy's mother had "arranged for me to be given a job as a waitress at the TB sanatorium that summer so Buddy wouldn't be lonely," but in an act of monstrous proportions, Esther chose to take the internship in New York instead; Buddy and his mother were baffled by her choice taking her away from the care-taker role.

This isn't Buddy's first experience with the monster; however, as Esther learns by delving into his past. Eve's story finds its way into *The Bell Jar* as Buddy tells Esther about his loss of virginity, being seduced by a waitress at a restaurant where he worked. Buddy blames the woman for his "Fall," claiming that it was the waitress's fault that "he lost his pureness and

virginity,” a loss of innocence occurring three times a week for the rest of the summer (57).

Esther condemns Buddy at this moment for hypocrisy, and vows to herself to be rid of him, although inconveniently his TB is discovered very nearly after the conversation, making her escape more difficult.

Betsy and Doreen, and symbolically what each girl represents, set the stage for the pull and tug that Esther experiences throughout the rest of the novel, “as if [she has] a split personality or something” (17). Esther is experiencing the demand of the dichotomy, the necessary fitting of a female character into the angel, or the monster, category. Meeting and spending time with Doreen in New York had led her, voluntarily, away from the angel. She bounces between the two during her stay, as exclaimed in her purifying bath, but her conscious decision to leave the door unlocked.

Esther’s last night in New York finds her with Doreen, attending a party as the date of a menacing man named Marco. Marco proves to be a misogynist, calling Esther a slut as he throws her down in the mud and intends to rape her. With a few well-placed kicks, Esther does break free, but the emotional impact is enough to send her reeling. After returning to her hotel, she takes her clothes from her suitcase up to the rooftop, raises a worn out slip above her “like a flag of truce,” and discards each piece over the edge (91). She had hoped to spend her last night in New York experiencing the mystery of the city, an individual acting in an independent manner, doing something which she wants to do, but is instead drawn out by Doreen, and pulled over to the monster end of the spectrum, nearly paying a dear price for having done so.

The next morning, on the train ride home, Esther wears a new role, provided graciously by Betsy. Having discarded her clothes, Esther was left with nothing but a bathrobe. Betsy, angelically, trades an outfit of her own for Esther’s robe, providing Esther with a skirt and a

blouse for the train. “The skirt was a green dirndl with tiny black, white and electric-blue shapes swarming across it, and it stuck out like a lampshade. Instead of sleeves, the white eyelet blouse had frills at the shoulder, floppy as the wings of a new *angel*” (92 emphasis added). Esther assumes the identity of the angel, but only in light of her near-rape; angel is her only other option. Her angelic identity, at this moment, is in appearance alone; the Esther who follows New York is an Esther of apathy, an Esther who gives up on creating her own identity, and soon to be a monster by default.

Following New York, in spite of her “new wings,” Esther again drifts toward the monster role, but a different version of the monster. While Doreen embodies the seductress, Esther, neither seductress nor housewife, becomes another monster, the madwoman. Becoming the madwoman does not free Esther of her bell jar, as the madwoman is only another ascribed female character in the patriarchal tradition; she is “reduced to mere properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts” (Gilbert and Gubar 12).

Being a female writer adds to the conflict already inherent in Esther’s existence as a female character. The inability to create a story as an author troubles Esther. Double this experience with the tribulation of trying to develop *herself* as a character, and the causation of her madness is better understood; Esther exists as an intelligent woman trying to fit into a society in which no role has been allowed for her and her abilities. *The Bell Jar* examines Esther’s internalized otherness as it becomes outward madness; angel versus monster, with no in between.

Esther has excelled in school, and her intelligence is apparent throughout the text, with her quick commentary and sharp observances; she has dreamed, and believed herself to be capable, of high achievements. Gilbert and Gubar assert the problematic nature of dreams and aspirations for intelligent women, “for women who felt themselves to be more than, in every

sense, the properties of literary texts, the problem posed by such authority was neither metaphysical nor philological, but...psychological” (13). The madness that follows Esther’s internship, and realization of her meager possibilities as a writer, manifests because of her intelligence, and her awareness that she is far more capable in the field of writing than just a copier of the patriarchal text already in existence.

Any hope of rebounding from her experience in New York is shattered directly upon her return home, her mother breaking to her the news of rejection to a summer writing course; Esther is to spend her summer in the dreaded suburbs. At this point, Esther completely checks out; “I had nothing to look forward to” (96). From this point in the novel forward, Esther declines rapidly. She can no longer sleep, and decidedly abstains from socializing and showering. Three weeks into her stay at home she “was still wearing Betsy’s white blouse and dirndl skirt,” the outfit smelling “sour but friendly” (104). Buddy falls in love with his nurse, pushing Esther to decide to write a novel over the summer, out of spite rather than hurt.

The novel is never written, nor does Esther begin on her senior thesis as she intends. She discovers that she can no longer read; “The letters grew barbs and ram’s horns” as she “watched them separate, each from the other, and jiggle up and down in a silly way” (102). Indecisiveness muddles her mind as she considers different life paths: typist, shorthand writer, waitress. Sleep completely eludes her, even with sleeping pills, so she is recommended to a psychiatrist. On the morning of her first appointment, Esther makes one last attempt at deciding something for herself by beginning a letter to Doreen, living in West Virginia, and asking if she might live with Doreen for the summer and get a job at her college. “When I took up my pen, my hand made big, jerky letters like those of a child, and the lines sloped down the page from left to right almost diagonally” (106). Esther can no longer write. She tears up the letter, and heads to the

psychiatrist, giving in and giving up.

Doctor Gordon hardly addresses Esther's disposition psychoanalytically before prescribing electro-shock treatment; "He seemed so slow to understand, how I hadn't slept for fourteen nights and how I couldn't read or write or swallow very well. Doctor Gordon seemed unimpressed" (110). The doctor likely wanted a patient to try out his electro-shock therapy on, because his facilities set-up is later proved to be violent. Esther leaves the treatment more disconnected than before, "dumb and subdued," unable to concentrate and absent from reality (Plath 119). Her suicide attempts commence after her electro-shock treatment, initially with the act of slitting her wrists. Even while she holds the Gillette blade, however, Esther is still aware that what she wants to kill is not herself, not what is "in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under [her] thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, a whole lot harder to get at" (Plath 121). Esther wants to kill her limitations as a woman, her inability to do what she wants to do. Killing her body at this point feels like the only action that she can take as an autonomous individual, "or it would trap [her] in its stupid cage for fifty years without any sense at all" (130). She would wind up in an asylum to be cured, "only [her] case was incurable" (130); she will always be a woman, trapped in the dichotomy. Even death by her own hand is a role in the patriarchy, a madwoman with a death wish, never able to obtain angeldom.

One suicide attempt in particular sends Esther to a private asylum. She ingests a bottle of sleeping pills and buries herself away under the house, in the unfinished portion of the cellar. From here she comes in and out of reality, nearly dying, until she is found by her mother. Later, in the hospital, Esther comes face to face with the monster that she has become. Begging the nurses for a mirror and finally receiving one, Esther does not recognize her own reflection, perceiving it to be a picture rather than a mirror; "You couldn't tell whether the person in the

picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow" (142). Esther's physical appearance is now monstrous, an outward manifestation of her actions as the monstrous madwoman.

The asylum to which she is later sent is private, so humane, and her new doctor, Doctor Nolan, is far more interested in helping Esther than Doctor Gordon had been. The asylum, no matter how nicely presented, is still a cage, still an establishment meant to produce angels from monsters. Esther immediately wonders as to why Valerie, a fellow patient and well-behaved woman, is being treated, later to find out that Valerie has been lobotomized; "Valerie pushed aside her black bang and indicated two pale marks, one on either side of her forehead, as if at some time she had started to sprout horns, but cut them off" (157). Valerie's monster attributes, the devil's horns, have been removed. Her brain has been successfully scrambled to that of an angel, a demure follower with no horns as weapons, or protection. Like Valerie's metaphorical horns, Esther's earlier handwriting sprouting ram's horns was also monstrous. The removal of the horns may eliminate the monster, but at what expense? If forced to become the compliant angel like Valerie, Esther could not create the writing she strived to create any easier than if the letters still grew horns.

When Esther improves in the eyes of the asylum, she moves to the most "stable" wing in the facility, and gains off-grounds privileges. A while into her stay, Joan, a former girlfriend of Buddy's and unpleasant acquaintance of Esther's, moves into the asylum, leaving her to wonder "if she will pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been, and what I had been through, and carry on a separate but similar crisis under my nose" (179). The plight shared

by all women is further exemplified when Esther asks herself why she attracts “these weird old women? There was the famous poet, and Philomena Guinea, and Jay Cee, and the Christian Scientist lady and lord knows who, and they all wanted to adopt me in some way, and, for the price of their care and influence, have me resemble them” (180). Perhaps these women saw in Esther a woman who may finally succeed in defining herself, the way that they had hoped to, but failed at; but here are Joan and Esther, struggling in the same cycle as the past generation of women, dashing the hopes of the older women wanting to live vicariously through the younger women.

Near the end of her stay at Belsize, the asylum, Esther equates madness to intelligence, or at least a belief in one’s intelligence, as she sits in the mental institution’s common room with the other patients, asking “What was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort” (194). The comparison works on two levels: one that both the angel of the college girl and the monster of the madwoman are suffocating under Plath’s symbol of the bell jar. And two, that the women who believe themselves to be intelligent, those wanting more out of life than bridge and gossip, will eventually end up at Belsize themselves, mad in the eyes of the patriarchy. As if to demonstrate this point, Mrs. Guinea, the famous novelist and benefactor toward Esther’s education, had “interested herself in [Esther’s] case and [reveals] that at one time, at the peak of her career, she had been in an asylum as well” (151). The nonchalant tone together with a stay at the local asylum suggests that this “madness” may not be so uncommon. As Joan prepares to leave the asylum, Esther notes that “it was as if we had been forced together by some overwhelming circumstance” (184), the circumstance of being a female in a society written to benefit the patriarchy, at the expense of the autonomy of womankind.

Esther struggles to be autonomous the entire narrative. She leaves for New York with ambitions to be a writer, a creator. Spending the month writing mindless fashion and event articles, and being pushed and pulled between Doreen and Betsy, she begins to realize her powerlessness within the system; her life possibilities dawn on her, a dark enlightenment. At first she struggles against her designated roles, but only succeeds in swinging between each end of the spectrum. She heads home with a glimmer of hope in the summer writing course, only to be further brought down by a rejection letter. The bell jar closes the gap with the bottom platform when she loses her ability to read and write; even the semblance of autonomy is stripped from Esther.

Although she is still living, Esther's lack of autonomy is a metaphorical death. "I am I am I am" becomes Esther's haunting mantra as she paddles out to sea, her heartbeat pounding inside of her body, reminding her that she is alive (129). Esther craves to be autonomous, not "killed into art" as the female dichotomy in literature dictates. However, "the creative 'I am' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is" (Gilbert and Gubar 17).

Female characters are not given the opportunity to develop, to assert the "I am" of themselves, as compared with that of their male counterpart; female characters are stripped of the ability to "get away from" the author. To "kill" a female character into art is to better possess her, because to "kill" takes away life, and therefore strips the character of the ability to change and develop, keeping her penned up in one of the extremes. The possession began with male artists in the patriarchal literary tradition, as seen in Pandora, Lilith and Eve, and the practice continued into female literature; "for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself" (Gilbert and Gubar 17). As Esther chants "I Am," and as female creators struggle toward "I

Am,” the ascribed roles stand in the way of self-definition and self-discovery; neither the character nor the creator can see past the socially indoctrinated roles of angel and monster to become “herself,” an autonomous individual. As both a creator and character, Esther is trapped.

To combat the patriarchal “killing into art” the female author must herself commit murder. The angel and the monster must be sacrificed for the greater good; “women must ‘kill’ the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been ‘killed’ into art” (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Unfortunately, the character of Esther attempts to kill herself literally, throwing her into the category of “madwoman,” rather than freeing her from the dichotomy. She aims the killing at herself, playing into the patriarchal codes and depriving herself further of the autonomy for which she truly desires. The mental institutions represent the madwoman’s pens, while becoming the perfect housewife and chaining herself to her husband represents her fate as an angel. Neither can satisfy Esther’s dreams and intellect, and both deprive her of the ability to be an autonomous character, developing and creating for and towards *her*, the “I Am” that she so desperately craves.

Esther never succeeds in killing herself during the time that Plath tells her story, but the reader does not know for sure whether she escapes the confines of the asylum. Early on in the novel, Esther does look back on the past six months and refers to the present as “when I was alright again,” but “alright” could mean that she has succumbed to the angel side of the spectrum, and become “alright” in the eyes of society; the reader is left to question Esther’s fate. *The Bell Jar* may not have a definite ending, but the story is testimony enough to the struggle of female characters and creators. When Buddy, the man whom Esther was supposed to marry, calls Esther neurotic, Esther replies in such a way as to explain the entirety of the female condition; “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m

neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days'" (76). Esther wants a balance, to be both the angel and the monster in a combination created for and by her. Esther portrays her life as that of a neurotic, jumping between angel and monster, but truly wanting neither, and both. The reader may not know for certain Esther's fate, but the prognosis is foreshadowed early on by the female character and creator herself; the "I Am" can never be achieved if this dangerous dichotomy is allowed to live.

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